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SIPDIS

DEPT FOR D, P, EAP, IO
NSC FOR LIZ PHU AND CINDY CHANG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PREF UNGA CB

SUBJECT: PREAH VIHEAR: LESS TENSION; MORE CONCERN

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH A. MUSSOMELI, REASONS 1.4
(b) and (d).

¶1. (S) During a farewell lunch for the Ambassador with the Prime Minister's son, Hun Manet, the latter raised concerns about the ongoing Preah Vihear controversy. Manet, who was graduated from West Point and who now is heading Cambodia's counter-terrorism assault force, wondered whether Cambodia's patience and low-key approach to Thailand's military incursion into territory long occupied by Cambodia had not been a mistake. Manet argued that it appears that while the initial incursion onto Cambodian soil had not been authorized by the Thai government, that government now saw potential territorial gains from a more aggressive policy regarding border issues. He gave his view that Cambodian patience and its refusal to use force have been interpreted by Thailand as weakness. Manet noted that the deployment of Thai troops around Preah Vihear was recently followed by deployments of more Thai forces in other disputed terrain near the Ta Mouen temple, and that this may have been a direct result of Cambodia not taking a tougher stance.

¶2. (S) Ambassador countered that there appears to be progress in peacefully resolving this issue. The Thai cabinet has approved withdrawal in principle of Thai forces and another round of high-level talks are slated for August 18. Manet, repeating for emphasis the phrase "in principle," predicted that orchestrating the withdrawal of the Thai and Cambodian forces would prove more difficult. The Thai, he insisted, see no downside in resisting a peaceful solution and they can use the tension with Cambodia to distract their citizens from more pressing domestic concerns.

¶3. (S) Ambassador urged continued patience and greater efforts at finding a diplomatic solution. The last thing Cambodia needed was armed conflict with Thailand. Both countries needed good relations with the other and if this matter can be resolved bilaterally with ASEAN support, this would be best for all. While agreeing, Manet pointed out that Thailand was refusing any ASEAN assistance in resolving the matter, and averred that the Thais now believe the UNSC will not intervene. Ambassador, reiterating the Secretary's point, noted that we continue to believe that taking this issue to the UNSC is premature, but that we have not dismissed the prospect of UNSC action if all other options falter.

¶4. (S) Comment: Given the recent downplaying of the Preah Vihear issue in the Cambodian press and the efforts of both governments to agree -- even if only in principle -- to withdraw military forces from the disputed territory, Manet's comments were somewhat unexpected. It may well be that they were precipitated simply by President Bush's recent visit to Thailand and Thai media reports suggesting that the USG is in lockstep with the Thai view that this is merely a bilateral issue undeserving of international attention. We corrected

the record, stressing that our continued support for ASEAN participation in resolving the issue is at odds with the Thai view. Moreover, while we continue to believe that this matter is best resolved bilaterally or in an ASEAN context, we have not dismissed the possibility of UNSC action if all other diplomatic means to resolve the conflict fail. Hun Manet, like many other Cambodian officials, believes firmly that it was only the prospect of this issue being raised at the UNSC that convinced Thailand to agree to bilateral talks and they now fear that if the Thai are certain that no such prospect is viable, then they will have no motivation to follow through on a troop withdrawal. We are more sanguine about prospects for a peaceful, face-saving solution and we will continue to counsel patience and flexibility.

MUSSOMELI